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Pattern of conferences

Access to the optical disk system

Report of the Secretary-General

1. In its resolution 51/211 F of 15 September 1997 on the pattern of conferences, the General Assembly encouraged the Secretary-General to develop a policy for the further expansion of the optical disk system of the United Nations, including provisions for making it available on a fee-for-service basis to any interested party, on the understanding that access would continue to be provided free of charge to permanent and observer missions and other government offices of Member States, with a maximum of 10 access passwords for each Member State, as well as provisions for making it available to all staff of the Secretariat.

2. In the same resolution, the General Assembly requested that the Secretary-General submit a report on the policy to the General Assembly for its consideration at its fifty-second session. The present report is provided in response to that request. It also addresses issues raised by the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions in its first report on the proposed programme budget for the biennium 1998-1999 (A/52/7, chap. II, part VIII, paras. VIII.110–VIII.113), among others its view that "greater efforts should be made to explore the possibility of generating income through the sale of access to United Nations databases".

Background

3. The optical disk system (ODS) contains United Nations parliamentary documentation issued since 1993, in all six official languages. Resolutions and decisions adopted since 1946 by the General Assembly, the Security Council, the Economic and Social Council and the Trusteeship Council are available in all six languages, fully indexed and retrievable. Some official records issued since 1946 are also stored, as well all currently valid administrative issuances of the Secretariat. All judgements of the Administrative Tribunal were added to ODS in 1997.

4. ODS was designed as a storage and retrieval system for United Nations documents and official records. Users who have access to ODS from their personal computers can search for documents, retrieve them in electronic format, view them and print them on their computer printers. ODS includes indexing and cataloguing data from the computerized bibliographic database of the Dag Hammarskjöld Library. In addition to the full text of each document in each official language, ODS provides a facility to search for words and/or phrases across the text of all documents stored on ODS. The system does not distribute or send documents to users based on mailing or distribution lists.

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5. As noted in the report of the Secretary-General dated 5 August 1997 on access to the optical disk system (A/C.5/51/56), ODS via the Internet was made available free of charge to permanent and observer missions to the United Nations in November 1996. By June 1997, all permanent and observer missions had been connected to the Internet and had access through it to documents stored on ODS.

6. As presently configured, the capacity of the system is adequate to provide access free of charge under the terms approved by the General Assembly in paragraph 1 of resolution 51/211 F to Member States, observers and Secretariat staff, among others. Interest in ODS from other potential users is considerable and requests for access have been received from a wide range of organizations and individuals.

7. A sustained addition of users, however, will require additional investment in the project. Given that interest as well as its potential for contributing to the financing of a future expansion of the system, new categories of users should be given access on a fee-paying basis. A portion of the revenue thus created should be used to expand the capacity of the system. Access by fee-paying users would be provided while ensuring that due consideration is given to maintaining the quality of service and the priority given by the General Assembly to the users mentioned in paragraph 1 of resolution 51/211 F.

Proposed policy and considerations

8. It is therefore proposed that, in addition to the users who have free access to ODS, in accordance with paragraph 1 of General Assembly resolution 51/211 F, other categories of users should be allowed access through annual subscriptions to the service. The following list categorizes the additional users and proposes discounts to be offered to fee-paying users:

Category of user	*Discount (percentage)*
(a) Governments and governmental units at the national, State or local level and inter-governmental organizations, other organizations and other entities that have received a standing invitation to participate as observers in the sessions and the work of the General Assembly will receive 10 free passwords.	50
(b) United Nations specialized agencies: A proposed memorandum of understanding on the common use of ODS was submitted to the Administrative Committee on Coordination in December 1997, to be taken up at its meeting in March 1998. It includes, *inter alia*, a provision that each organization of the United Nations system will be able to request up to 50 access passwords at no charge.	40
(c) Intergovernmental organizations other than those listed above:	
(i) First subscription	60
(ii) Additional subscriptions	40
(d) Accredited non-governmental organizations:	
(i) In least developed countries	50
(ii) In other countries	40
(e) Depository libraries	
(i) In least developed countries	50
(ii) In other countries	40
(f) Not-for-profit organizations, including universities, research institutions, libraries, etc.	
(i) In least developed countries	40
(ii) In other countries	30
(g) General public and all for-profit organizations	Full price

9. The sale of subscriptions to customers is the responsibility of the Sales and Marketing Section, Office of Communications and Public Information. As with other sales activities, the Financial Regulations of the United Nations require that these activities are undertaken at no additional cost to the Organization. When a publication in electronic or hard-copy form has been determined to be saleable, the price is set by the Sales and Marketing Section under the guidelines established by the Publications Board as contained in administrative instruction ST/AI/189/Add.15/Rev.1 of 30 June 1992.

10. The basis of the guidelines is that pricing should be established by taking into account the cost of a product and also prevailing prices within the marketplace. In the case of ODS, the cost of the product would be based on the technical, administrative and other sales-related costs associated with adding new users. Information on subscribing to the service would be available directly from the Sales and Marketing Section or via the United Nations home page on the Internet.

11. Income generated by charging for access to ODS would be classified as miscellaneous income. Net resources would accrue accordingly under income section 3 of the regular budget. As it is too early to estimate income for the 1998-1999 biennium, it is proposed that such income would be reported in the budget performance report.